



CORONERS INQUESTS



A Resident's Disappearance Body Recovered From River

After seven weeks' painful suspense, the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Mr. Francis William Ash, a well-known and respected inhabitant of the village, has been cleared up by the recovery of his body from the river in the vicinity of Whaddon.

On December 2nd, Ash visited the Bath Eye Infirmary, where he received a very discouraging report concerning his eyes. This undoubtedly preyed on his mind, and on December 5th, after partaking of the midday meal, he left home ostensibly to return to his work. He, however, never arrived there, but was observed proceeding along the road leading to Melksham. This was the last seen of him, and as week succeeded week and no tidings could be gleaned of him, despite the most diligent enquiries and search, the hope that he was still alive became more and more remote. The mystery, however, was not solved until Tuesday, when as stated, a decomposed body, identified as that of the missing man, was recovered from the river.

Ash is spoken of in the highest terms, both as a resident of Holt and as a worker, and his tragic death - whether it is the result of his own act, or due to accident - has aroused widespread sympathy in the locality, consequent upon the peculiarly sad circumstances attending it.

An inquest was held by Mr. Coroner Sylvester at Whaddon Farm House on Wednesday afternoon, when Mary Ann Ash, the widow, identified the body as that of her husband, who she said was 48 years of age and a mattress maker employed by Messrs. J. Sawtell and Co. She could tell it was he by the clothes and a piece of pencil found in his pocket which she remembered seeing him use on the day of his disappearance. On Tuesday December 5th, her husband came home to dinner at one o'clock and left again as usual at about ten minutes to two. At four o'clock she sent his tea, but a message was brought back that he had not returned to work. Enquiries were made, and later information was given to the police, and since that date no-one had seen him.

Questioned by the Coroner, Mrs. Ash said her husband's health had been fairly good. He had, however, previously suffered from neuritis, and had been attended by Dr. Taylor, at Bradford. Lately his sight had failed, and on Saturday, December 2nd, he went to Bath Eye Infirmary, where he was told that the sight of one eye had practically gone and the other failing, and that nothing could be done for him. He was given a note to take to Dr. Taylor, which he did the same day. Prior to this he was, though quiet, cheerful, but the bad report as to his eyes made him very depressed. He had never threatened to commit suicide, and she had no idea that he intended to harm himself in any way.

Mrs. Sealy, wife of Thomas Sealy, living at the Common, Holt, said she knew the deceased and last saw him on December 5th, at 2.30pm, proceeding along the Holt to Melksham road.

Edmund White, farm bailiff, residing at Whaddon, said on Tuesday he was cutting wood by the river near the Holt signal box, and there saw the body of a man about eight feet from the bank entangled in some blackthorn bushes. He got the body to the bank and informed the police.

P.C. James Dalton, stationed at Semington, said the previous day, from information received, he went to the river near the spot indicated by the last witness and there saw a body fully clothed floating in the water. He procured assistance and recovered it. In the pockets he found a handkerchief, a piece of pencil and a considerable number of wire staples (produced).

Dr. Rumboll, of Melksham, said he had examined the body, the condition of which was consistent with it having been in the water for six or seven weeks. There were no apparent marks of violence. The witness explained that the trouble with the deceased's eyes was optic neuritis and that he was gradually becoming blind.

Mr. Couzens, works foreman at Messrs. Sawtell's said the deceased was employed by his firm and was using wire staples similar to those found on the body, on the morning of his disappearance. He was a very steady man and a splendid workman; in fact the firm never had a better. There was no ill-feeling whatever in the works and deceased was always cheerful up to the time he went to Bath. Witness was suffering from a similar complaint to deceased and on the morning of December 5th they had a conversation about their eyes. Witness told deceased what the doctor had advised him to do, and suggested that he should do the same. He made no complaint and no-one would have thought he intended to harm himself. (Mr. Couzens later expressed the sympathy of himself and his firm with Mrs. Ash and her family in their trouble).

The Coroner, in summing up, said the jury had first to decide as to the identity of the body found. He did not think there was any doubt it was the body of Ash. There was no evidence, how he got into the water, whether he fell in or walked in. The only evidence they had was that he had had a very unfavourable report from the oculists and afterwards was considerably depressed. He suggested that an open verdict should be returned.

The jury, of whom Mr. Ernest J. Nichols was foreman, returned a verdict accordingly.

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